An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT

St Mary’s Knockbeg College
Knockbeg, Carlow

Roll Number 61130H

Date of inspection: 1 and 2 March 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in St Mary’s Knockbeg College, Carlow. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

St Mary’s Knockbeg College introduced TY to its programme provision in 1994. The college offers TY as an optional programme, which is outlined in the college’s admission’s policy. There are currently two class groups following the programme. The aim of the college to enable students to acquire self-confidence, life-skills and attitudes for leading satisfying lives are fulfilled through many aspects of the TY programme such as student participation in the Gaisce award and through the road safety and life skills programmes. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

A whole-school approach to promoting and implementing the TY programme is fostered by senior management and this provides good direction in the development and implementation of TY in the college. The college website highlights significant aspects of the TY programme through photographs and articles. The TY notice board in the school’s central corridor displays significant TY events and competitions for students. This is commended. The school staff is kept well informed regarding the TY programme through the notice boards in the staffroom and the electronic notice boards in the college. To further strengthen whole-staff awareness of the TY programme, it is recommended that the TY co-ordinator be afforded the opportunity to address staff meetings on TY issues on a regular basis. This may also develop further staff ownership of the programme and staff input to the programme.

Student achievement is celebrated by the whole school community at the TY presentation night. This important event includes a formal presentation of TY certificates for participation in the programme and for achievement in TY curricular areas such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), Tourism, Driving Course, Public Access to Law and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) Coaching. This is very good.

1.2 Resources

The different elements of the programme are appropriately timetabled. The provision of designated lesson periods on the timetable for activities is recommended to ensure that time is not
lost from other modules and subjects. In addition, to provide further diversity within the programme, consideration should be given to the development of specific half-year or ten-week TY modules within the timetable.

Staff is appropriately assigned to teach the programme. Staff development is critically important to any successful TY programme. Therefore, it is recommended that school management endeavours to facilitate the attendance of teachers at continuing professional development (CPD). One area worthy of consideration is inservice support on writing the TY programme where Department of Education and Skills guidelines are presented.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is utilised effectively in implementing the programme. While specific TY resources are stored in subject departments, consideration should be given to drawing up an inventory of all TY resources on the school’s e-portal system.

1.3 Student selection and support

The college supports students in making an informed choice regarding participation in the TY programme with input from senior management, the TY co-ordinator, the guidance service and subject teachers. An information letter is sent to parents explaining the extent of the TY curriculum, the nature and purpose of TY and the importance of the commitment of students to the programme. The college does not currently convene an information event for parents regarding TY. Therefore, in the interests of best practice, it is recommended that such an event be scheduled in future years.

Students who would benefit from participation in the programme are targeted and in most cases avail of the programme. Applications to the programme are invited and all applicants are interviewed. All successful TY applicants and parents are required to sign a contract of learning. This is very good practice. To strengthen this process, it is recommended that a TY admissions policy be developed, where the criteria for the allocation of places to TY are clearly laid out. On enrolment to the programme, parents agree to the payment of a contribution to cover expenses for many activities. Some additional expenses are incurred for courses and activities organised throughout the year.

All TY teachers meet students on TY induction day to outline their programme of work for the year and to explain the nature and purpose of TY. There is no TY induction event, at the outset of the year, which would further focus all TY class groups on the benefits of the TY experience. Therefore, it is recommended that consideration be given to scheduling a TY student induction activity in future years.

TY students are provided with timetabled guidance and work preparation provision. A comprehensive guidance plan has been developed with the focus of the programme being provided through the ‘Be Real Game’. Students are supported in their subject choices and career options and evaluate their work experience and voluntary work in the community. This is very good practice. Students partake in aptitude tests in third year.

Students with additional needs are very well supported. Good practice is informed by school assessments, recommendations from psychological reports and information from parents and subject teachers. Every effort is made to ensure that all students can participate fully in lessons with withdrawal from class only on rare occasions where it is deemed that the student can benefit from this action.
Poor attendance of some TY students was noted in the course of the evaluation. Senior management is urged to monitor closely their strategies for addressing poor attendance in TY. It is important that students and parents are constantly reminded of the importance of school attendance.

1.4 Home-school links

Senior management, the TY co-ordinator and the TY year head maintain close links with parents throughout the year. Parents are invited to significant events throughout the year, including the TY presentation night where they can avail of the opportunity to interact with teachers to discuss their son’s progress in an informal way. However, in the interests of best practice, it is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be convened at which the TY student is present. In this way, parents can receive useful information on their son’s progress and teachers can receive useful evaluative feedback on the student’s TY experiences. This provision will further support the school’s communication process with parents. Parents, for their part, support TY in the college in many ways, helping with work experience placements and with extra-curricular activities.

2 Quality of Programme Planning and Coordination

2.1 Planning

The college has a good level of planning in place. The small TY core team consists of the TY co-ordinator, the TY year head and the TY class teachers. Members of the core team meet informally to plan and implement the programme.

The TY written plan comprises of an overview of some aspects of the programme for the current year together with many individual subject and module plans. The plan is incomplete, is not in line with Department guidelines and individual subject plans examined are inconsistent in their adherence to the subject plan template for TY. Some TY subjects are not included in the current plan, some lack sufficient detail, while others are not relevant to the current year. The TY plan needs major development and review. Therefore, it is recommended that a whole-staff approach is adopted to writing the TY programme. In particular, each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in the guidelines. Areas in need of attention include teaching and learning strategies, cross-curricular planning, review and evaluation and modes of assessment. The content of some TY subject programmes should be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material. Teachers should make reference to Circular M1/00 in this regard. The TY plan should be developed as a single cohesive and current document with all of the areas in the guidelines addressed, including organisational details and self-evaluation measures. Reference should be made to the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for further assistance www.slss.ie. School management is encouraged to provide for the training of staff in writing the TY programme as indicated earlier in this report.

To further develop the TY planning process, it is suggested that the college considers developing some transition units. This would also help to enhance cross-curricular provision in the future. Details of transition units including a teachers’ handbook and sample units can be accessed on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) www.ncca.ie/transitionunits.
The college outlined good self-evaluation measures for TY which include comments gathered from students by means of questionnaires. Further evaluation from parents would strengthen the overall review process. Self-evaluation measures in place have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the college. For example, recent important additions to the programme include Music and Road Safety. Students indicated a good level of satisfaction with the school’s TY programme in the course of the evaluation.

2.2 Co-ordination

Formal co-ordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively. TY co-ordination duties are extensive and are carried out very effectively. Specific duties outlined include liaising with subject teachers, the core team and senior management, co-ordinating work experience and promoting TY in the school. Currently, these duties have not been formally recorded or agreed. Therefore, it is recommended that the duties and responsibilities for the post of programme co-ordinator as outlined in circular PPT 17/02, be clearly documented and agreed. In addition, school management should arrange to provide an appropriate reduction in teaching hours to the programme coordinator in compliance with the above circular.

The co-ordinator has regular class contact with TY students and maintains good communication with students. This is very good. Communication with parents, senior management, teaching staff, students and the whole school community is also good. Resources including ICT are used effectively in the co-ordination of the programme.

2.3 Curriculum

TY students are encouraged to build on their academic achievements and to prepare for senior cycle and their future role in society. Efforts are made to provide students with a broad and varied curriculum and this was found to be the case in the course of the evaluation. Needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised and active learning, group work and teamwork have been successfully integrated into the college’s TY programme in some subjects. The support and encouragement given by teachers to students to participate in out-of-school activities and competitions has proven to be particularly effective.

Students can study a wide variety of subjects and modules. Some optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled, while core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and are allocated regular lesson periods throughout the week. Ability groups are formed for some core subjects. School management should re-evaluate the necessity for the formation of ability groups in some core subjects, and should consider if this arrangement best meets the needs of TY students. Many subjects and modules offer students variety within the curriculum and the opportunity to learn new skills. The provision of the stained glass design module is both creative and innovative. The Rape Crisis Centre’s awareness module provides a valuable opportunity for growth and learning. Since the above modules are quite lengthy, it would be good practice to formally timetable them in future years. Environmental awareness is taught through many modules including environment studies, the ECO-UNESCO project and through tourism. In addition, TY students play an important role in the Green Schools’ project.

It is praiseworthy that students partake in community service on occasions throughout the year and the college plans to extend community service to one week of provision during the current year. In
this way, students are provided with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and actively participate in their local community. This module plays a vital part in fulfilling key aims of TY, such as developing a sense of social awareness.

Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the college, as these activities are seen by the school community as a vital element of the TY programme in the college. Many activities promote important character development skills and promote TY aims in this regard. Students also partake in many out-of-school activities, including the President’s award scheme (Gaisce), visits to science-related events, environmental field trips and visits to museums.

Work experience provides a vocational element to the programme and tasks undertaken in an adult working environment play an important part in the development of students’ experiential learning. Students are required to find their own work placement with final approval by the college and all students are encouraged to find a work placement where a career is sampled. This is commended.

Work experience is organised in two blocks, with one week in October and two weeks in February. Good communication mechanisms are in place with phone contact from the college during the work experience and feedback from employers playing a major part in shaping the programme into the future. It is praiseworthy that students are required to maintain a record of their experience. Employers provide useful evaluative feedback to students at the conclusion of the process.

The entitlement of each student to a minimum of twenty eight hours of instruction time each week is highlighted in circular M29/95. The school timetabled allocation to class groups falls somewhat short of this requirement. Therefore it is recommended that senior management should restructure the timetable to ensure that each student receives their minimum entitlement as set in the above circular. In addition, it is essential that all TY students complete a full school year of 167 days as outlined in circular M1/00.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A written plan for the current year was available for the majority of subjects evaluated. The taught programme reflects in the main, the school’s plan for the programme. Individual lessons were well planned. There was effective planning for resources with handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment ready in advance of lessons. The varied methodologies observed and the good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Students exhibited positive attitudes to learning. Teachers displayed high expectations of students thus ensuring that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential. Teachers, in the main, demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons and there was a clear focus on skills development in many lessons. During one lesson observed, students exhibited very good communication skills while delivering a presentation to fellow students. It is praiseworthy indeed that such confidence-building measures, in line with TY guidelines, are incorporated into elements of the TY subjects. In another lesson, students learned about the importance of decision-making in managing their finances. This is very good. An atmosphere conducive to learning prevailed in all lessons visited. Students, in the main, appeared to enjoy the
learning experience both within and outside the classroom. Students were motivated to learn and in many cases took responsibility for their own learning. Relationships in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.

Lessons were well structured and classroom management was effective in most instances. The structure of lessons helped to contribute to successful learning outcomes. The pace of lessons was appropriate to students’ abilities. In many lessons, teacher inputs were appropriately short, clear and concise. The variation in methodologies ensured that students’ interest and motivation were maintained and that opportunities for learning were maximised. The board was used to highlight key ideas in many lessons. There was particularly effective use of video as an aid to teach road safety.

Group work played an important role in some lessons. Some groups were quite large and this led to a lack of participation by individual students. Therefore, for all students to be actively engaged in the assigned tasks, it is recommended that groups be restricted to a maximum of three students and that the lesson outcomes and timeframes be clearly defined. In one instance, a group was assigned to another classroom for part of a lesson. This is not satisfactory, as teachers need to ensure that all students are supervised at all times during lessons. Senior management should ensure that sufficient resources are in place to implement a particular subject or module.

ICT was used appropriately in some lessons and it is recommended that its use be extended and its benefits maximised across the curriculum. In one lesson visited, ICT was very well utilised as a focus for learning and relevant websites were accessed in relation to the topic of the lesson. It is important that should technology fail that backup plans are ready to be implemented to ensure that all students are duly occupied during lessons. Good use was made of various questioning strategies in lessons visited. Individual questions elicited specific responses while higher-order questions encouraged students to explain their reasoning. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students’ understanding of material was of a high quality.

### 3.3 Assessment

Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports sent home on three occasions throughout the year. The format of the reporting template for TY has been modified following review and evaluation. This is commended. There is ongoing assessment through class work and project work. Employers assess students’ work experience and return an evaluative report to the college. Peer-assessment is encouraged and promoted in some lessons and this was observed to be very good practice. The quality of students’ work in the classical studies’ projects examined in the course of the evaluation was very good. Students receive homework assignments on a regular basis in the form of worksheets and project work.

Students maintain a portfolio of their work for all subjects and are interviewed on this basis at Christmas and summer. This is very good practice. To strengthen the assessment process, it is recommended that that a more structured portfolio interview be introduced as part of students’ overall end-of-year assessment. For example, students may be required to choose what they consider to be some of their best work for the interview and interview criteria and marking should be clearly set out. In addition, consideration should be given to students maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographs of activities undertaken during TY.

TY students have exhibited high achievement in many projects and competitions throughout the year. This is praiseworthy and the commitment of teachers is highly commended.
5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach to promoting and implementing the TY programme is fostered by senior management.
- Self-evaluation measures in place have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the college.
- Formal co-ordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively. TY co-ordination duties are extensive and are carried out very effectively.
- Needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised.
- Lessons were well planned. There was effective planning for resources. The varied methodologies observed and the good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning.
- Students exhibited positive attitudes to learning.
- Teachers displayed high expectations of students thus ensuring that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential.
- Students were motivated to learn, relationships in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- The provision of designated lesson periods on the timetable for activities is recommended to ensure that time is not lost from other modules and subjects.
- Consideration should be given to the development of specific half-year or ten-week TY modules within the timetable.
- It is recommended that school management endeavours to facilitate the attendance of teachers at CPD. One area worthy of consideration is inservice support on writing the TY programme where Department of Education and Skills guidelines are pursued.
- It is recommended that a TY admissions policy be developed.
- It is recommended that the duties and responsibilities for the post of programme coordinator be clearly documented and agreed. In addition, the college should arrange to provide an appropriate reduction in teaching hours to the programme coordinator.
- The entitlement of each student to a minimum of twenty eight hours of instruction time each week and to complete a full school year of 167 days should be implemented.

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